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The Bodey Oil Lamp: The Illumination of Dating Through Construction and Design

³ The wheel-made lamps held prominence in ancient lamp factories due to ease of construction caused by the supremacy of its technology. That advantage, however, was usurped by the gradual adoption of the two-piece mold method in the second⁴ and third⁵ centuries B.C. The mold-made lamps then became the standard of production during the later Roman Republic and Imperial eras, with the most noticeable technological variation being the decline in the proficiency with which they were made.⁶

The Bodey Lamp exhibits many of the characteristic qualities of a lamp constructed with the two-piece molding technique. During fabrication, clay would be pressed into both the upper and lower halves of the mo

⁷ When looking at the Bodey lamp from the side,⁸ the evidence of the two halves having been joined together and then smoothed over by a tool is clearly visible around the outside equator.

Secondarily, the decorative additions are of a nature distinct to a later period in the development cycle of two-piece molded lamps. For example, the wheel made lamps⁹

¹⁰ Contrary to this description, the Bodey Lamp is both of a lighter construction, and highly decorative. In fact, the type of relief decoration placed on the discus is a common feature particular to the Roman lamp makers beginning in the age of Augustus, although some early antecedents occurring in the second century B.C.¹¹ Therefore, the two-piece molding process

³ Richard Howard, *The Athenian Agora, Volume IV: Greek Lamps and their Survivals* (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1958), 5.

⁴ H.B. Walter, *Catalogue of the Greek and Roman Lamps in the British Museum* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), xxi.

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restricts the oldest possible dating to 300 B.C., as that technology was not used before then, while the presence of the relief decoration narrows the oldest likely dating to around 50 B.C. Recourse to the specific stylistic characteristics would allow for a yet more accurate dating of the Bodey Lamp.

To this end, an examination on the appearance and ornamentation of oil lamps as the popular fashions flickered, with an emphasis on the early Roman Imperial age as directed by the construction methods used, will enable the Bodey Lamp to be matched with whichever age it is most indicative of. Starting with known lamps dated at 400 B.C., the assumed date of the Bodey artifact, the common and popular style was an open-bodied, wheel-made lamp with a bridged nozzle which the wick would rest in.¹² The dissimilarities between this style of lamp and the Bodey lamp are clearly seen and nearly innumerable. Setting aside the different methods of construction for a moment, the Bodey lamp on the one hand has a plug handle pierced with a small hole, a closed oil well covered by the discus, a more substantial nozzle flanked by volutes, and decorations adorning both the lip and the center. On the other hand however, the example lamp from 400 B.C. has a strip handle, open well for oil, a slight nozzle with no volutes, and absolutely no ornamentation. This, alongside the knowledge that the manufacturing technology of the Bodey lamp was not utilized for another two or three hundred years, strongly suggests that it is not from 400 B.C.

Moving now to where the preliminary re-dating by means of the artifact's construction indicated, the early Roman Imperial age lamps are remarkably similar to the Bodey Lamp. Not only was the artifact constructed in the same way as those lamps, using a two-piece mold, but they also share many of the distinctive stylistic elements indicative of that time period. For instance, one lamp¹³ dated about 80-120 A.D. has analogous decorations on the discus with the air hole drilled in an

¹² See picture IV. From: Howard, *The Athenian Agora, Volume IV: Greek Lamps and their Survivals*, Plate 36, Artifact 222.

¹³ See Picture V. From: J. W. Hayes,

unobtrusive spot, looped plug handle opposite of the bridged rounded nozzle winged by volutes, and a thin rounded lip.¹⁴ Although the fringe on the example lamp in Picture V is unadorned, another in the same manner found on the Bodey Lamp.¹⁵ The parallels between these example lamps and the museum piece suggest that the artifact is from the early Roman Empire, somewhere in the hundred years between the middle of the first and second centuries A.D..

To restate what has been said, both the two-piece molding method used for the Bodey Lamp's construction and the distinctive decorative elements found upon it reasonably point to an early Imperial dating between 50-150 A.D. instead of the original 400 B.C. dating proposed by the display card. This illumination of dating is a light unto the path of the past. It is the beginning steps to a more complete understanding of the early Roman Empire, and an artifact of not only the ground, but also of the people whose own paths were once lit by it. The Bodey Lamp still enlightens the potter's hands that pressed the shapeless clay into the mold,¹⁶ upon the friend it might have once been given to in celebration of a new year,¹⁷ and upon those other pieces displayed on all sides of it. Truly history's flame still burns in the Dunham Bible Museum with the Bodey Lamp now leading the way.

¹⁴ Hayes, *Ancient Lamps in the Royal Ontario Museum I: Greek and Roman Clay Lamps*, 50.

¹⁵ See Picture VI. From: Bailey, *A Catalogue of Lamps in the British Museum, Volume II*, Plate 22, Artifact 964; Bailey, *A Catalogue of Lamps in the British Museum, Volume II*, 188.

¹⁶ For a discussion on the particular process of making a lamp in this way see; Walter, *Catalogue of the Greek and Roman Lamps in the British Museum*, xvi-xvii.

¹⁷ It was common practice in Rome for, during the celebration of New Years, friends to give each other lamps dedicated to Janus for the illumination of the upcoming year's journey. See: Lesley Adkins, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Facts on File, 1994) 281.

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